

Communicating Under Stress

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As if dealing with the direct effects of stress were not challenge enough. When we are in a stressful environment, everything seems to take extra energy and effort. In times of crisis and high stress, we have to take particular care with our communication efforts. In situations that are emotionally charged or controversial, anxiety levels soar and communication becomes both more complicated and more important than ever.

Effective communicators foster knowledge and understanding through constructive dialogue that supports informed decision making. To do this, they must build a foundation of trust and credibility. In the best of circumstances, avoiding misinterpretations takes skill and commitment. In an environment of heightened stress, many communication obstacles are exaggerated. Areas of sensitivity become more sensitive. Minor misunderstandings become major roadblocks.

Mental Noise Theory states that clear communication happens only when we overcome a certain degree of mental noise. It further suggests that when people are stressed or upset, they have greater difficulty hearing, understanding and remembering information. As a result, it is even more important to use the best communication tools available when interacting with people under stress.

Here are some key things to keep in mind. The higher the level of stress, the more important it is to know your audience and show that you are listening. People are more willing to listen to what you have to say when they believe you are listening to them in turn. In the words of Stephen Covey, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood".

Remember, the greater the stress the greater the need for brevity, clarity and repetition. To help people understand your message, provide information in small chunks that are easily absorbed. Use the "brevity rule" (27/9/3). Limit individual pieces of information to twenty-seven words per slide or fact, nine minutes before a mental break (eg. visual), or three key messages in a full presentation. To make sure that your message is easily understood, use familiar words and simple sentences (the 6th grade rule). Help your audience remember key points by repeat them and presenting them in different ways.

Using visuals and increasing face to face communication will also help get your message across during times of high stress. When interacting in person, pay particular attention to non-verbal signals. Use them to help you assess how your message is being heard. Also, watch what your own non-verbal communication is saying.

Creating the environment of trust that you need for effective communication is harder when anxiety is high. When people are upset or under pressure, they are more distrustful. For that reason, it is not enough to be knowledgeable. In addition to showing competence, your ability to connect will depend on being caring, empathetic, honest and open. In fact, empathy, concern and active listening account for up to 50% of trust building. Another human trait that often blocks communication is our tendency to focus on the negative. This is called the Negative Dominance Theory. Research finds, because of this trait, that it takes at least three positive statements to offset the impact of one negative statement. Of course, the habit of concentrating on negative feedback and evaluation becomes much stronger when we are "stressed-out". So increase positive feedback since even a three to one ratio may not be enough.

The more stressful our environment, the more we need to connect and communicate. In times of crisis and anxiety we need to feel heard and to feel that we belong. In these circumstances, more than ever, our communication must demonstrate compassion, conviction, truthfulness and credibility. Our presentations, conversations and documents must be brief, clear and repeat key messages. Most importantly, we must remember that the characteristics of good communication don't change under stress they just become more vital.